



Approved For Release 2004/10/08 : CIA-RDP79T00472A000700020014-5

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# Memorandum

POST-KHRUSHCHEV SOVIET POLICY  
AND THE VIETNAM CRISIS

3 April 1965

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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OCI No. 1188/65

3 April 1965

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
MEMORANDUM

Post-Khrushchev Soviet Policy  
And the Vietnam Crisis

1. The new leadership's first major departure from Khrushchev's course in foreign and international Communist affairs has miscarried badly and has plunged the USSR into its most serious policy dilemma since the Cuban crisis of 1962. The calculations underlying an ambitious though cautious effort to reassert Soviet leadership in the Communist world while maintaining the detente line toward the West were abruptly upset by the chain of events precipitated by the Viet Cong attack at Pleiku on 6 February and the US reprisals against North Vietnam. The Soviet leaders now find themselves faced with a deterioration in relations with the US, a potentially dangerous involvement in the Vietnam conflict, and an aggressive Chinese reaction which has again thrown the USSR on the defensive in the contest with Peiping. They are groping for a way to extricate themselves from this impasse which would enable them to salvage something from the effort to restore closer ties with Hanoi without inflicting further damage to Soviet relations with the US.

2. This costly Soviet venture appears to have been based on the conviction that Khrushchev's policy over the past year or so had drifted too far in the direction of rapprochement with the US at the expense of the USSR's standing in the Communist world. The new leaders, therefore, set out to restore a more even balance between policy toward the West and relations with foreign Communist regimes and parties.

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3. At the outset, the Soviets assigned first priority to dealing with the disarray in the Soviet bloc and the world Communist movement. In order to expand their freedom of maneuver in coping with these delicate problems, they sought to insure against serious complications with the West by stressing that foreign policy differences were not involved in Khrushchev's downfall and by reaffirming their continuing commitment to peaceful coexistence and a further reduction of tensions. This new departure, however, not only required a general standstill in relations with the West but a more aggressive Soviet posture toward the "imperialists." An appeal for Communist unity in the face of a growing imperialist threat was accompanied by an upsurge in Soviet denunciations of US policy in Southeast Asia, the Congo, Latin America, and in NATO affairs.

4. In developing the Communist unity line, the Soviet leaders had no illusions about Peiping's ambitions and antagonism. Their objective was not to seek a reconciliation but to develop more adroit and effective tactics for combating the Chinese challenge. The Albanians responded to Kosygin's foray into Asia by serving notice that they were not deceived by the new line. An article in their party newspaper in mid-February declared that the "Khrushchevite troika of Brezhnev, Mikoyan, and Kosygin is trying to take advantage of Khrushchev's liquidation to stabilize the situation and to gain the same objectives as Khrushchev but by different means." The Chinese, for their part, waited until after the "illegal and schismatic" meeting of 19 parties in Moscow to announce that it was now possible to see more clearly that "in replacing Khrushchev the new leaders of the CPSU simply changed the signboard and employed more cunning methods and subterfuges in order the better to push through and develop Khrushchevism and to carry out the general line of revisionism...."

5. The main feature of the new Soviet approach was to disengage from Khrushchev's tactics of unilateral initiatives and pressures on foreign parties

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and to wrap Soviet moves in the mantle of multi-lateral consultations and decisions. Foreign parties were given to understand that the new leaders felt Khrushchev was responsible for bringing the Soviet dispute with China down to the level of personal antagonism by resorting to harsh and rude statements. They conveyed the impression that although there would be no concessions on long-contested substantive issues, the USSR intended to abandon Khrushchev's "collision course" tactics and work toward a modus vivendi with China. The Soviets adopted a posture of moderation and restraint toward Peiping, called for a "step-by-step" progress toward resolving difficulties, and constantly stressed the need for unity in the "common struggle against the common enemy--imperialism." They also professed interest in "activizing" state relations with China and expanding trade and scientific-technical cooperation, and asserted that they had advanced proposals on these matters.

6. The most urgent problem facing the new leaders at the outset was to find a way to retreat, at the least political cost, from the Communist "preparatory meeting" which Khrushchev had unilaterally scheduled for 15 December. Although talks with Chou En-lai in Moscow in early November produced no agreement, the Soviets worked out an arrangement with other party delegations to postpone this meeting. In contrast with the unilateral Soviet action last summer in convoking the December meeting, Pravda announced on 12 December that the meeting had been set for 1 March after "mutual consultations" with fraternal parties.

7. By far the most significant move in this unfolding enterprise was the dispatch of a strong delegation headed by Premier Kosygin to visit North Vietnam and North Korea, with two brief stopovers in Peiping itself. Subsequent events have painfully brought home to the Soviet leaders that they greatly underestimated the strength of Peiping's reaction to what it was bound to consider impudent interference in China's exclusive sphere of influence.

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8. Soviet accounts of Kosygin's talks in Peiping reveal the cold arrogance with which Mao received the Soviet delegation. He rejected Kosygin's appeals for a cessation of polemics and "splitting activities" and rebuffed a proposal for high-level bilateral talks with the statement that the time is not yet ripe. Mao also opposed multilateral party meetings and said that a new world Communist conference would not be possible for another eight to ten years. According to these Soviet briefings, Mao attacked the Soviet "peaceful coexistence" line as profitable only to the imperialists and declared that Chinese policy would continue to rest on the assumption that world tensions will grow and that another world war is unavoidable in ten to fifteen years. He is said to have argued that only such a war would reunite the USSR and China.

9. Talks with the North Vietnamese delegation in Moscow last November may have encouraged the Russians to believe that an increase in military aid would be effective in drawing Hanoi back toward a more "neutral" posture in the Sino-Soviet conflict, thus scoring a significant gain against the Chinese.

10. Moscow's decision to abandon Khrushchev's policy of disengagement from the Indochina conflict probably was also motivated by the belief that a stronger Soviet presence was essential to discourage the possibility of US attacks on North Vietnam and to gain a greater voice in Hanoi's conduct of the war. There were indications last fall that the Soviets were concerned that both sides were contemplating actions which could lead to a rapid escalation and confront the USSR with awkward and dangerous decisions. Kosygin probably intended to warn the North Vietnamese not to underestimate US determination to prevent a Communist victory in the south; his mission presumably was to urge Hanoi to avoid actions which might provoke US retaliation and alter the terms of the conflict and to play for time to allow political disintegration in Saigon to ripen.

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11. At the same time, the Russians took various steps to reduce the danger of US actions which might expand the conflict. They attempted to influence decisions resulting from Ambassador Taylor's consultations in Washington by issuing a TASS statement on 26 November cautioning the US against "provocations" and stating that the USSR "cannot remain indifferent to the fate of a fraternal socialist country and is prepared to give it the necessary assistance." This ambiguous pledge, which was one of the first overt signs of the more assertive course, was reiterated in subsequent statements by the top Soviet leaders. Gromyko's soundings in the US in the first half of December apparently persuaded the Soviets that the risks of their new policy were acceptable. They sought to place further inhibitions on US actions by responding favorably, at first privately and later publicly, to the President's suggestion in the State of the Union message regarding a visit by the Soviet leaders to the US. In an obvious effort to soften the impact of the 31 January announcement of Kosygin's mission to Hanoi, an authoritative Pravda article simultaneously announced that the President's reference to expanding US-Soviet contacts had found a "positive response" in Moscow.

12. The initial Soviet reaction to the Viet Cong attack at Pleiku the day after Kosygin arrived in Hanoi displayed not only shock and indignation but a clear lack of foreknowledge of this operation. The disarray in the Soviet delegation was obvious in Kosygin's first public statement after the initial US reprisal attack. He avoided the standard pledge of "all necessary assistance" and took refuge in an even more noncommittal formula that the USSR, in line with its "international duty," would strengthen the defensive capacity of the "socialist commonwealth of nations."

13. Private remarks by Soviet officials reflected an immediate recognition that these events had placed the USSR in an "impossible" position of having to choose between military support for North Vietnam or opening itself to Chinese charges of capitulation to the imperialists. Moscow's

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first official reaction betrayed its anxiety to forestall further escalation, salvage the Kosygin mission, and contain the potential threat of severe damage to relations with the US. Thus the government statement of 9 February sought to absolve Hanoi of responsibility for the Pleiku raid by attributing it to South Vietnamese "partisans" and asserted that the USSR would be "forced" to take further measures to strengthen the DRV's defenses. The Soviets reaffirmed their desire to improve relations with the US but felt obliged to add that US actions might nullify steps already taken.

14. The intensity of Soviet embarrassment and outrage at the humiliation suffered by Kosygin was evident in private conversations. A few Soviet officials termed the US attack during Kosygin's presence in the DRV an unfriendly act toward the USSR, but a more common reaction was that the Chinese had inspired the Viet Cong raid in order to embarrass Kosygin and disrupt US-Soviet relations.

15. The Kosygin delegation went through the motions during the remainder of the Asian tour as if nothing had happened to compromise the purpose and prospects of the mission. The communiqué with the North Vietnamese announced that the parties had agreed on measures to consolidate DRV defenses and on regular exchanges of views on this question. It endorsed conferences on Laos and Cambodia, but said nothing about negotiations on Vietnam.

16. The Soviet leaders recognized that US air strikes and aggressive Chinese propaganda attacking the idea of negotiations had at least temporarily removed the option of any specific Soviet proposal for negotiations. They adopted a noncommittal posture and evaded questions by Western ambassadors in mid-February regarding the Soviet attitude toward a conference, saying only that negotiations were out of the question as long as the air strikes continue. The Soviets, however, took care to keep channels open and to convey an interest in working with the US toward a settlement in a series of private approaches to US officials.

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17. The French statement of 10 February re-stating the need for a conference without preconditions offered the first opportunity for Soviet movement. Ambassador Vinogradov called on President de Gaulle on 23 February to point out the coincidence between the views of the two governments. He ventured a guarded suggestion for further bilateral discussions, and listed a cessation of the air strikes as the only precondition for negotiations. While it is unlikely that the Soviets believed that much would come of the French initiative, they probably felt that support for de Gaulle's ambitions to play a major role in bringing about a settlement would be of some value as a political deterrent to US policy.

18. Kosygin's carefully drawn statements in his 26 February report on the Asian mission clearly represented the limit to which the Soviets felt able to go at that stage in the crisis. He avoided commitment to any specific proposal but voiced the desire of "peace-loving countries" for a solution "at a conference table" and called for an end to US "aggressive actions" in order to create conditions for exploring "avenues leading to the normalization of the situation in Indochina." But even this formula drew an angry retort from Peiping that China would never bow to US blackmail and that "no socialist country should."

19. The mutual recriminations between Moscow and Peiping over the 4 March anti-US demonstration in Moscow, which Chinese students succeeded in turning against Soviet authorities, pretty well demolished what little remained of the new Soviet leadership's design for Communist unity against the imperialists. Peiping's astute maneuvers to discredit Soviet support for North Vietnam and Soviet policy in general, combined with the intensified pace of US-SVN air strikes in March, obliged the Russians to retreat from Kosygin's position at the end of February. It is probable that the North Vietnamese about this time also made known their opposition to any Soviet initiatives on negotiations. Gromyko in London refused to even mention Vietnam in the communiqué with the British and

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rejected any possibility of discussing ways to bring about a conference. Brezhnev's speech at the 23 March celebration for the cosmonauts contained no mention of Kosygin's formula.

20. The Soviets apparently feel they have little freedom of action at this stage. Their main concern at the moment is to guard against further Chinese allegations of Soviet "subservience" to the US. This was the purpose of Brezhnev's pledge that the USSR will never make North Vietnam's interests a "subject of a deal with anyone."

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21. In the meantime, the Soviets feel they have no choice but to maintain a hard public line demanding the immediate cessation of the air strikes and to proceed with at least a limited program of military assistance to North Vietnam. Brezhnev stated on 23 March that the USSR is "already" assisting Hanoi and Soviet officials have indicated privately that arrangements for shipments by rail of supplies to the DRV have been completed and are now functioning. This policy, however, appears to have encountered Chinese obstruction. The Soviets have complained that Peiping is interfering with these shipments and insisting that it will permit transit only if the equipment goes forward as joint Sino-Soviet aid under complete Chinese control. This interference emphasizes the lengths to which the Chinese are prepared to go in blocking an expansion of Soviet influence in Hanoi. It has placed the Soviets in the embarrassing position of having to decide whether or not to acquiesce in this Chinese claim to veto or impose conditions on Soviet assistance as the price for making good on Kosygin's commitment to Hanoi. The Soviet leaders probably would be most reluctant to accept the risks of US interdiction of an attempt to supply North Vietnam by sea. They almost certainly would fear a repetition of Khrushchev's humiliating backdown in the face of the US naval quarantine in the Cuban missile

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crisis. The Soviets apparently have been unable so far to escape this quandary. But they have begun leaking information on Chinese obstructionist tactics to the foreign press and they almost certainly are trying to take full advantage of this in Hanoi to score points against the Chinese.

22. The Soviet leadership appears to see no way to avoid a further deterioration in relations with the US, but they probably hope to prevent this from leading to serious complications elsewhere. They will continue to issue private reminders of their desire to cooperate with the US in finding a way out of the impasse and their interest in a political settlement based on the neutralization of South Vietnam and the withdrawal of foreign forces under appropriate guarantees.

23. In surveying the wreckage of their design to restore Soviet leadership in the Communist world, Khrushchev's successors have good reason to entertain some rueful thoughts about the wisdom of his policy in dealing with the Chinese and avoiding involvement in the Indochina duel between the US and Peiping and Hanoi. Khrushchev gradually came to recognize that the USSR was operating at great disadvantage vis-a-vis China in this area and that no Soviet interests would be served by political or military intervention in the duel.

24. For Khrushchev's successors, this experience seems likely to pose in an increasingly acute manner the hazards inherent in trying to pursue simultaneously the conflicting requirements of domestic reforms and growth, which favor stability and a detente line with the West, and a drive to outbid and outmaneuver the Chinese in a vain quest for "leadership" of the Communist world. This condition of political schizophrenia has long been at the root of Soviet frustrations and swings in policy lines. Although it is obviously beyond the capacity of any Soviet leader to make a clear-cut choice between these conflicting purposes, Khrushchev's decisions in the last

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year of his rule tended to fall on the side of defending and advancing the USSR's interests and needs as a great power at the expense of its pretensions to leadership in the Communist world.

25. The new Soviet leaders are now wrestling with the same problem of determining the order of priorities in dealing with foreign and Communist affairs. The miscarriage of their first major foreign policy enterprise has painfully demonstrated the incompatibility between Soviet and Chinese objectives. The far-reaching implications of the issues at stake in the developing crisis in Vietnam place the Soviet collective leadership under some strain and introduce an element of uncertainty in the future evolution of Soviet policy. At this point, however, the urgent requirements of domestic economic reform and growth, to which Brezhnev has deeply committed the new regime, and the unhappy experience with the Chinese on Vietnam policy seem likely to strengthen the Soviet leaders' incentive to shift the balance back toward detente and accommodation with the US.

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